

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

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Teaching and Learning Insights

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TEACHING AND LEARNING INSIGHTS

“I think that [the TLI] benefits both parties because it enhances possibilities for mutual respect and learning and we really do become colleagues.”

– Faculty Participant

In this issue’s section of "Teaching and Learning Insights," we highlight recurring themes that faculty and student participants in TLI forums identify as they illuminate Thiessen’s notion of a pedagogy of mutual engagement. All inform one another, but we have organized them into two loose categories, the first of which highlights a shift in perception and the second of which demonstrates a change in practice:

(1) gaining perspective, particularly as such perspective is fostered through partnerships between faculty members and student consultants, and

(2) engaging in more intentional communication, both through expression and through consultation.[1]

You can read through the entire series of statements by faculty members and student consultants, or you can click on any of the statements below to go directly to faculty member and student consultant reflections on that issue:

(1) Gaining Perspective

- *Partnerships between faculty and students offer a unique opportunity to develop perspective*
- *Faculty reflections on gaining perspective*
 - *the importance of gaining perspective through reflection*
 - *the importance of gaining the student’s perspective*
 - *how accessing the student perspective can inform practice*
- *Student consultant reflections on gaining perspective*
 - *the importance of gaining perspective through achieving a different angle of vision on the classroom and the experiences of participants within it*
- *Faculty reflections on heightened awareness*
 - *of how they approach their students and their practice*
- *Student consultant reflections on heightened awareness*
 - *of the different perspectives always at play in a classroom and of themselves as learners*

(2) Engaging in more intentional communication

- *Faculty reflections*
 - *engaging in greater pedagogical transparency*
 - *being more intentional in communicating with and consulting students*
- *Student consultants’ reflections*
 - *communicating and consulting more regularly with faculty members*

(1) Gaining Perspective

Both faculty members and student consultants emphasize how their partnerships offer a unique opportunity to develop perspective:

“Meeting once a week with a student consultant is **an intense exercise in self reflection**...the weekly cycle of teaching and co-reflecting encourages deeper and more general exploration of pedagogical issues. My sense is that I will be working on these issues for a long time to come.”
(Faculty Member)

“I have always respected people in the teaching profession without knowing how teachers engage with the teaching (and learning) process. Working with my faculty partner has helped me to **think more consciously of the different teaching styles and methods of my professors**.”
(Student Consultant)

Faculty members articulate the importance of gaining perspective through reflection:

“Even if I have been teaching for a while, it is always good to **step back and reassess what [I am] doing and see what could be made better**. I believe it is an invaluable tool to reflect upon one’s pedagogy and practice as a teacher.”

“I have learned to engage in the process of evaluating my teaching on a consistent basis. With each class, there are new opportunities to explore issues of balance between lecture and discussion, classroom dynamics, and other pedagogical techniques. Learning to **engage in reflective teaching** has been the greatest lesson of the TLI process.”

“Thinking about and revising assessment made me take a hard look at my goals for students. This has helped me **gain some perspective and awareness of my teaching practices**. I found I was more interested in formative assessments than summative. In turn, I realized I structured my courses to emphasize content. Consequently, I have been working on **restructuring my courses to better reflect my goals**.”

Faculty members emphasize in particular how important it is to gain the student’s perspective:

“This experience has given me the wherewithal to **see the classroom with a student’s eyes**.”

“I was able to get a sense of how others experience the class – so **rather than always privilege what worked for me as a student, I work to draw out how different pedagogical practices/learning styles can illuminate the space of a classroom for all those around the table**.”

“[Participating in the TLI has allowed me] to get a student’s perspective on my teaching style and the material covered, and learn more about how students live and what they do outside the classroom. It also allowed me to **understand much better some of the reactions of my students**.”

“Being able to learn firsthand (well, secondhand) about the experiences my students are having in other classes helps give me **a context for better understanding their constraints and experiences**. It is one thing to be aware that my students have many other classes; it is another to hear how differently they are asked to think and document their learning. It is also impressive to really think about how much diverse, difficult, yet fascinating information they are asked to take in each week.”

Accessing the student perspective can inform practice:

“What do they understand? How do they understand it? What are their misconceptions (or different but useful conceptions?) Are they breaking away from their prior ideas, building on them, or beholden to them? **I can’t bring them together with my discipline if I don’t know these things and use these things.**”

“**Understanding where students are coming from makes it easier to introduce new material**, and helps me adjust the course content to match their tastes. The students in my classes come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and discussing ideas on how to learn about their past learning experiences was useful.”

“I feel that even once this semester is over and [my student consultant] is no longer in my classroom on a daily basis, I should be able to **continue teaching as though I were in a continuous dialogue with a student consultant.**”

Student consultants articulate the importance of gaining perspective through achieving a different angle of vision on the classroom and the experiences of participants within it:

“I am constantly reminded of just **how many unique individual perspectives there are in one classroom**: I think this is something that I as a student and a teacher and a consultant tend to forget. My own perspective is not the only one, but neither is the person sitting next to me. It is hard but interesting work to try and tap into each student’s experience and knowledge and what they bring with them to the class ... and then use that to make the class the most rewarding experience it can be.”

“It makes me a much more conscious student. **I look at my classes through the perspective of both students and teachers**. Further, it has helped me appreciate the contributions of others. I can remove myself from the competitive atmosphere within the classroom to see other students’ assets.”

“I have learned that teaching requires that the educator be vulnerable because what happens in the classroom and what is said about the educator’s teaching can be really upsetting. That realization **makes me think twice about harshly judging or letting anyone else harshly judge a professor’s teaching.**”

“**I have never before thought about or discussed so many of the difficult questions that professors here face**. I have often thought about what teachers could do for me personally as a student, but I have a much better understanding now that my point of view is often far from

representative of a whole class of students. Because my education is what is currently the dominant force in my life, I love having the forum of discussing ways in which it could be improve or how it is working well.”

The perspective that faculty members and student consultants describe stays with them and informs their ongoing reflection, taking the form of a heightened awareness:

Faculty members develop greater awareness of how they approach their students and their practice:

“I’m **much more aware of how I interact with students in the classroom** because of my [student] consultant’s feedback.”

“Working with my student consultant has affected my teaching by making **me more conscious of what I do and why I do it**. . . I think in the past I asked questions and made decisions about exercises without being conscious of what I hoped to gain from them. Now, I have a clearer idea of why I’m doing something and I think this has improved my choices. For instance, I never thought much about my what-did-the-reading-say questions. Now, when I plan my lectures, I am clear about when and why I ask these questions.”

Student consultants develop a greater awareness of the different perspectives always at play in a classroom and of themselves as learners:

“I have learned a lot about the different relationships involved in teaching and learning and how people’s perspectives really play a large role in how they view education. Seeing how professors approach their classes and what they ask questions about and how they talk to one another in the faculty seminars has made me more aware of the difference between students and faculty and our perspectives on issues. Seeing this alternative perspective has also made me **more aware of my position on these issues**, which has been enlightening.”

“I have never before thought about or discussed so many of the difficult questions that professors here face. I have often thought about what teachers could do for me personally as a student, but **I have a much better understanding now that my point of view is often far from representative of a whole class of students**.”

“With every class I take now, I find myself evaluating the methods that are being used in class. I ask myself, Why is the faculty using this? Why are we practicing it in this way? Being able to ask those questions **helps me process exactly what I am supposed to be learning**.”

“I had no way of knowing that there were so many related, but more complicated and nuanced outcomes like understanding **the multitude of perspectives that people bring with them to school/work every day** and the multiple roles each member of the community plays.”

“I think that TLI has made me much more sympathetic to professors. I don’t think I ever really realized how vulnerable-making, anxiety-provoking and personal teaching can be for some (most? all?) professors. I also didn’t realize how much planning and deliberate decision-making

can/does go into teaching. **Now when I am a student in a classroom, I am much more conscious of thinking about why professors are making the decisions they do and how certain approaches, strategies, or activities work out.** Whereas before I might have assessed a class period more based on how much *I* enjoyed it or how engaged *I* was, now I am much more likely to be conscious of the entire class community, professor included.”

“Now, pedagogy and the **complex interactions of professor and student**, and student and student, are central to my experiences of education—both in the classroom of my faculty partner and in my other classes.”

“I constantly evaluate the level to which I engage with the material I learn. I may not necessarily change my strategy for engaging with ideas but I realize that **I have become much more conscious of my level of engagement.** I realize that I have become more aware of my own learning patterns. As I help my faculty partner to process different strategies to enhance the learning experience, I feel empowered to think about the different ways in which I learn.”

(2) Engaging in more intentional communication

The new perspective faculty members and student consultants gain, and the heightened awareness they develop as a result, lead to efforts to engage in more intentional communication, both through expression and through consultation.

Faculty members describe engaging in greater pedagogical transparency:

“The process of **observing** my students’ reactions to my teaching, **reflecting** upon those observations, and **adjusting** my style and techniques accordingly is something I plan to carry forward.”

“This semester I am making a special effort to **make sure that all of the aspects that I value show up somewhere on the syllabus** and that the work I ask students to do really builds on the course goals.”

“I have already implemented **more explicit expectations for my students.** I wanted to give students more and more frequent insights into my hopes and goals for them. Because I leave plenty of room for student directed, and student centered learning, I have begun to consider the possibility of supplying more structure. In the past I have conflated structure with prescribing a specific dogma or content, but I am beginning to see how I might give students more tools to build meaning without telling them what meaning to make. In the future I hope to supply lessons, activities, and assignments that will more effectively help students develop this ability.”

“[Professors] should **make clear what they insist on in terms of performance and participation.** Often students respond very well once standards are articulated.”

“**Usually my conversations about learning goals and how to meet them occur in my head.** It is easier to fool myself that I am clearer about them than I really am. I will miss the opportunity to articulate those goals for another person, thereby distinguishing what makes sense from what

remains fuzzy. **I resolve to increase the number of opportunities to have those conversations with the students in my classes.**”

Faculty members describe being more intentional in their efforts to communicate and consult with students:

“I work with students more as colleagues, more as people engaged in similar struggles to learn and grow. I have become even more convinced that students are experts in learning and essential partners in the task of creating and developing new courses and refining existing ones.”

“...at some points I look to some students explicitly for feedback about what’s going on in the class and discuss ideas for how to move forward; these might be students I’ve worked with before, and/or who have done TLI, or it might be that they’ve indicated in some way an interest in participating on this level.”

“I ask students what they want and need, while reminding them what they want and need has to be negotiated as a class community, which includes the professor.

“While the needs and desires of student and teachers are inherently in tension because of differences in power and authority, it is important the space between teachers and learner be diminished through collaboration in an effort to enrich the learning environment.”

Student consultants describe their efforts to communicate and consult more regularly:

“Professors are very understanding of students’ needs but a dialogue must be created first. I like many other students are sometimes very afraid and hesitant to approach my professors about issues I am having in class because I assume they will not care. I am realizing this assumption is dangerous and will do more harm than good especially when most professors want students to talk with them. I should continue to try to take the initiative and vocalize any concerns, questions, or inhibitions I may have with a professor.”

“I am reminded that professors are nervous when they have to teach. They are human just like me and have fears and concerns however for the most part they cannot allow that to prevent them from doing their jobs. I have become more sensitive and aware of ways to contribute to make the classroom environment a comforting environment for everyone, the professors included.”

“I think I am more sensitive to professors than perhaps I may have been in the past (I can have a tendency to be critical of my educators). I also think that I am more attuned to what I think professors could do to make a class better, and as a result will be able to write more meaningful comments on evaluations.”

“I am more willing to approach a professor and explain what I think would be best for the class rather than take the passive role of simply complaining.”

“When you see everything that goes into [teaching] for them, all the thoughtful intentionality and the vulnerability that goes into it, your compassion for that leads you to be **more empowered to speak because it’s not such a dichotomized relationship.**”

“In my interactions with professors, **I have a newfound ability to discuss openly where I am struggling and what I think I need.**”

“Now I am so used to meeting with professors and disagreeing respectfully and calmly that **it really isn’t scary at all.**...I value the ability to communicate critiques respectfully.”

“My participation this semester also allowed me to continue building and strengthening my communication skills. Working with my faculty partner, who at times saw things very differently, provided me with an opportunity to **work through the ways I needed to adapt my words or ideas in ways that would make them easier to hear or understand.** I think being able to be multilingual in this way, so that we can communicate across disciplines and perspectives in ways that do not force direct translation but allow for creative interpretation and a space for understanding is an invaluable life skill.”

“**I have gained a much deeper understanding and appreciation of the importance of building relationships between and among professors and students.** Having done consulting work, it seems that literally everything boils down to – or is determined by – what kind of a relationship the professor has with his or her students. It is always worth it to spend time getting to know each other as people first, and in the roles of ‘teacher’ and ‘student’ second. As a student, **this has made me feel much more responsible to go out of my way to visit my professors during office hours and to be more communicative with them.**”

[1] For other discussions of these and related insights, see Alison Cook-Sather, forthcoming, “Lessons in Higher Education: Five Pedagogical Practices that Promote Active Learning for Faculty and Students,” *Journal of Faculty Development*; Alison Cook-Sather, “Layered Learning: Student Consultants Deepening Classroom and Life Lessons,” *Educational Action Research*, 9, 1 (March 2011), 41-57; and Alison Cook-Sather and Zanny Alter, “What Is and What Can Be: How a Liminal Position can Change Learning and Teaching in Higher Education,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 42, 1 (2011), 37-53.